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### Goddesses and Women: Asserting Self through Religious Poetry

**Abstract:** Throughout the ages, Hindu religiosity developed potent patterns in belief and practice which placed goddess worship at the locus of Hindu religious life, thus having great ramifications for women's condition in society. This paper analyses the advent of the women's writing in the religious domain as an assertion of the self at the intersection of the figures of goddesses and the consequent cultural consciousness that is self contradictory but serves as an important backdrop to the comprehension of the women's voice. Women who surrendered themselves to the quest and devotion of god, poetry acted as a medium for them to move from the illusion of the material world to reach the spiritual reality. Women ascetics liberated themselves from the injunctions of social norms declared an autonomous subjectivity through their devotion and surrender to a personal god. The intense emotions created by this quest gave themselves shape and utterance through the medium of literature of personal experience.

**Keywords:** Hindu Goddesses, cultural consciousness, religious poetry, women's voice.

In Hindu tradition, the goddess form is perceived as the operative faculty of origination and threshold of all energy but simultaneously, it is also carefully circumscribed in domestic terms according to the gender roles dictated by conventional societal norms. The images of goddess are regarded as the social and philosophical prototypes for erecting the structure of womanhood in the Hindu tradition. They act as the ideals of social conduct who overpowered woman's lives regardless of caste and social class. Womanhood and femininity are fabricated through the image of goddess in both the social as well as the metaphysical or spiritual arena.

The varied traditions, myths, observances, customs, images and symbols shaped a broad range of archetypal identities which are continuously defining women, sometimes mutually antithetical in the moral region and ordain their roles in life. As Tracy Pintchman throws light on the significance of examining how "Structures pertaining to the Goddess may help shape conceptions of the female gender, the treatment of women in Hindu society, and the roles that women are assigned" (qtd. in Bose 13). Women are readily labelled in their social relations with respect to the images of goddesses as they exert powerful and effective influence on the imagination of common people. In traditional Hindu Indian society, the ultimate reverence one can show a woman is to call her 'devi' and a very close addressing to it is calling her a 'mother'. These forms of addressing have a certain kind of value attached to them by Hindus in particular and by Indians in general. However, the extent to which these terms actually represent the Indian women's position in their lives and society is a totally different matter. These words denote veneration at the surface of social exchange but when one delves deep into their social function, one can realize how they are marginalised for the usage 'devi' does not form a part of the common human interaction in the society.

Even though the story of conception of Hindu goddesses is an intriguing one, many scholars writing about Hindu thought generally divided these deities into two broader categories of personality. In the book, *Introduction to Hinduism*, Gavin Flood comments that "there are two kinds of goddess representations: a ferocious form such as Kali and a gentle, benevolent form such as Tripurasundari or Laksmi" (Flood 197). David Kinsley also confirms the common division of Hindu goddesses into two wide classifications; one represented by the maternal instinct and the other characterized by repressing that instinct into their destructive nature. The repercussions of these divisions for mortal women's lives and their expected roles in society are huge as these goddesses are regarded as role models to be emulated by women in society.

The female deities characterized by benevolence emerged as the most effective and appropriate role models for women for they are designed to encourage dedication towards familial duties, ranging from women's self conditioning for marriage, to devotion towards husband, to the upbringing of children and ensuring the family's prosperity and welfare. The legends of Parvati and Laksmi make available the exemplar of the stern efforts to become a perfect and completely dedicated wife and of the amenable consort in the Indian system of arranged marriages. Another Goddess Durga is worshipped as the guardian of her children

and the implication lies in the thought that a mother must protect her children from harm in any circumstances by any means.

The rephrasing of the characteristics of these female Goddesses as the criteria for the shaping of mortal females exhibits requisites of social order very clearly, particularly in debilitating the intensity of the innate potential of the great Goddess Persona of Durga. In Hindu tradition, great emphasis is laid upon the role of wife and mother for the Hindu women and therefore, the practice of not paying too much attention to the goddesses as a transcendental force. The traits most emphasized and held up for imitation of these goddesses are their loving natures along with their roles as mothers and wives. This explains the popularity of Sita who being divine incarnated as a human being acting as a link between divine and human was idealized as a perfect wife, moderating the component of power implicit in the divine figures into the devotion of the wife.

The dreadful characters imagined as goddesses of destruction are clearly not regarded as models for women. It is worth mentioning that Kali or the more ferocious Chinnamasta or Camunda are not steadily and utterly described in terms of death and destruction but are also bounteous and benevolent towards their worshippers. They can be stopped even in their rage by heartfelt and sincere prayers. Moreover their fury is in fact a reaction to the necessity of protecting their public pleaders. Thus there is always a feeling of apprehensiveness related to the idea of Kali in Hindu imagination, as she is simultaneously essential for the survival as well as a threat to the existence of universe which leads to the duality in portrayal of her character. She is either granted a marginal position in the social space by emplacing her in the cremation grounds and remote wilderness as the preceding deity of wild tribes and plunderers or she is brought into the domestic realm as the devotee's mother or child. In the former role of the fearsome deity, she is visualized as a demonic figure with an impaired skeletal body. While in domestic sphere she is imagined as ferocious yet beautiful young woman with eyes reflecting grace and mercy. The projection of image of Kali in this ambiguous manner depicts the perplexing state of patriarchal system while dealing with female ownership of power and at the same time admitting the need for that power. Tracy Pintchman notes that,

In the Brahmaical tradition, there is a strong tendency to portray *prakrti*, *sakti*, and *maya* on one level as positive and creative yet at the same time inherently ambiguous and potentially dangerous. Therefore they must be

mentioned and controlled so that they manifest their positive tendencies rather than their negative ones. (Pintchman 18)

Until modern times in India, language arts was one of the few areas in which women could express themselves in their own voices when it was impossible for them to do so on common public platforms. The discussion of Hindu goddess as the idealized representation of energy and their transformation into role models for Hindu women brings out a goddess who with all her gentleness does not conform to the role of dependency. The Goddess referred to here is Sarasvati, the deity of arts and learning who is hardly visualised as a role model for the domestic role of wife or mother.

Contrariwise, she may be thought to give women their medium of expression because she is the Goddess of speech equally for men as well as women. Even then, women did not have it easy in traditional Hindu society where they could pursue the arts of language only for the most commonplace areas of life as speech can become a potent medium of self assertion and resistance which can grant freedom. Thus a sense of suspicion always lingered on granting women the freedom of speech. This is explained by the view that until the adoption of liberal education policies in India from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, learned women were often thought to be disregardful of their womanly responsibilities of taking care of their families. Thus seeking Sarasvati's blessing could be regarded as an option by woman which can grant them some freedom if not in practical life than at least in their imagination. It is apparent historically that poetry acted as a powerful and striking instrument with the help of which women joined the struggle to articulate and assert their individual identities.

If women want to break free from their traditional roles, it is imperative to look out for options of ideological precedence and alternative social routes which are available to them. Other than Sarasvati, the other centre of independence is even more dominated persona among Hindu deities who cannot be bound into any familial role, the ferocious yet loving Goddess Kali. Although she is associated with Siva yet her position with relation to him is that of equality and not conditional where she could be relegated to subjugation or to any prescribed role. This could be the explanation for some women who invoked her to facilitate the discovery of ecstasy of spiritual life without the aid of institutions of worship but immersing themselves in the liberating idiom of poetry. The articulation of women in the form of poetry could be regarded primarily as their efforts at asserting selfhood. In pre-modern times in Hindu society, women found a powerful medium of self-assertion in the

domain of poetry. Despite the patrilinear society and power structure, women's world included the platform of art in general and poetry in particular to assert their independent selfhood and to express their inherent essence. In poetry, women put their varied experiences into words. Most of the women chose the route of spirituality, some but not many chose to narrate their secular and social experiences. Thus arts have performed an important role of releasing women from the constrictions of the social world and being instrumental in making them achieve both spiritual and social autonomy. Although, there are no evidence available and thus no guesses can be made as to how many women might have expressed their thoughts and feelings through words or to what time do they belong to. However there were woman who held positions of honour in early India. Among whom there were women philosophers, and there were 'brahmavadinis' of whom twenty-seven are known by name and historical references to their work. Whether any of them wrote poetry is impossible even to guess.

Women voices are largely present in the domain of poetry in the history of literature from pre-modern India. Woman who surrendered themselves to the quest and devotion of god, poetry, acted as a medium for them to move from the illusion of the material world to reach the spiritual reality. Women ascetics, while pushing the world aside endeavoured to liberate themselves from the injunctions of social norms declared an autonomous subjectivity through their devotion and surrender to a personal god. The intense emotions created by this quest gave themselves shape and utterance through the medium of poetry of personal experience. The first recorded poetry attributed to women in India was by Buddhist nuns or 'theris' belonging to sixth century BCE and were known as *Therigathas* that is, song of 'theris'. In these short poems, there runs a common thread of the exhilaration of uncaging from an oppressive social order by accepting religion. These poems are not the philosophical exploration of Buddhist religious beliefs and thoughts but express the independence that the poets have encountered in their religious life and the opportunities they now have of attaining spiritual freedom. The essence of these short verses lies in this two-fold sense of emancipation, which is understood both as a spiritual and a social experience. As observed in the following poems:

Mutta:

O free, indeed! O gloriously free

Am I in freedom from three crooked things:

From quern, from mortar, from my crookback'd lord.

Ay, but I'm freed from rebirth and from death,

And all that dragged back is hurled away. (Rhys 11)

Sumana:

Hast thou not seen sorrow and ill in all

The springs of life? Come thou not back to birth!

Cast out the passionate desire again to Be

So shall thou go thy ways calm and serene! (Rhys 14)

These terse statements exhibit a complete disillusion with the material life, even physical life and the shift from material world into spiritual world provided them with a hope of emancipation. A similar impulse of moving away from the material to the spiritual world can be observed in women's poetry in the Hindu tradition but in that tradition, feelings and thoughts are presented in a more elaborate and sophisticated literary form. Women recorded their emotions predominantly in the realm of spirituality but they also spoke of their secular experiences and their dealings with the word. The secular and sacred life has been united in her life by Atukuri Molla, early sixteenth century woman of the Lingayat potter caste and her parents were devotees of Srikantha Mallesvara. Molla took a challenge from the brahmins and composed a Telugu version of the *Ramayana* having 138 stanzas in the six chapters in five days. Taking shelter in her devotion, she affirms her faith both in her God and her poetic ability in these lines:

I have no credentials in the fields of phonetics,

I can't spout declensions and root derivations,

I'm unschooled in tropes, or rhythms; the artifice

of prosody is not my thing either.

I lack the formal training in writing poetry

and composing long narratives,

I haven't scanned handbooks of style  
or familiarized with lexicons of grammar.  
But only by the grace of the renowned Lord,  
Shri Kantha Mallesha, somehow I've been blessed-  
I find I am able to write these verses. (Jackson 83)

In the above lines, Molla simultaneously asserts her faith as well as proclaims her position in the world of letters. In invoking her 'renowned Lord', she is employing the domain of religion to assert her personal authority against the reproaches of her would be social masters. These lines present an interchange of emotions not so much between deity and devotee as between the author and her material world. As Bose avers, "Responding to the material world and the conditions it imposes on the writer is a cultural phenomenon of long heritage within Hindu culture" (Bose 129). There has been a tradition of secular poetry in the Cankam culture of South India ranging from about 100 BCE to 300 CE. Earliest known poetry by Hindu women is associated with this period. These poems deal with two different domains of women's lives; one relates the women's response to the warrior culture they lived in and the other deals with their private emotional experiences. The pre eminent figure who deals with both kinds of poetry is Auvaiyar who is attributed with 59 of the 154 poems that talk of politics, war, kings and love. 'Cankam' poetry has been divided into two kinds: 'puram' and 'akam'. 'Puram' category is about public affairs, mainly the business of war as characteristic of a warrior culture while the poetry in 'akam' category is related with private experiences and reflections. In 'puram' categories, poems are reactions to the inescapable and distressing condition of losing husbands, fathers and sons to the relentless battles that defined their world. The resolute pride and fortitude with which these women face their situations could be perceived in the following excerpts from the anthology of battle poetry called *Purananuru*:

Song of Auvaiyar:

In the forward march of battle, with the royal drum  
enwrapped in thongs  
roaring, how can there be any victory left to be won? They

came

but could not stand against your vanguard. They scattered

and they ran! (Hart 65-66)

Song of Kakkaipatiniyar Naccellaiyar is as:

‘If he fled in the furious battle, I will cut off the breast

at which he sucked!’ . . . .

And when she found her son who was scattered

in pieces, she felt happier than she had been the day she

bore him. (Hart 165)

Song of Okkur Macattiyar:

. . . Her mind

whirling, she put a spear into the hand of her only son and

she wound

a white garment around his body and smeared oil upon the

dry

topknot of his hair and having nothing

but him said ‘Go now!’ and sent him off into the battle! (Hart 166)

This face-off with tragedy and grief led these women to assert their strength in an atypical womanly manner generally unexpected from the patterns of conduct characteristic of women’s nature.

The women writers discussed above have written poetry with an overwhelming intensity of feeling and a close conjunction of experience and expression. They follow literary patterns but do not let these conventions ordain their self discovery or self-representation. It is not that the women authors were not familiar with or did not use pervading conventions or patterns of writing. The main point of their writing was to express



their inner feelings and emotions and therefore individuality was the essence of their poetry and they did not prefer tradition to individuality. The point to be understood is that they did not write to get approval from the world but to make their existence meaningful by giving voice to their inner self. Whether they chose to scrutinize and criticize the world around them or tried to explore divinity through personal links, writing in religious and secular mode, these authors have dilated the definition of womanhood in the traditional Hindu discourse of gender.

Bose states:

The Hindu discourse on womankind is vast and more often divisive than not. The provisions for women's life in traditional thought are many and generally restrictive, especially when backed by religious ideology. Setting goddesses and mortal women side by side shows how Hindu thought has historically conflated power and dependency within the idea of womanhood, no matter how irreconcilable the two positions might be. Still more intriguing is that the seemingly inescapable dependency that such a belief system imposes on women has also provided room for liberation through acts of creative imagination within the conditions of its religious culture. (Bose 149)

Hindu Goddesses are designed in the mould of mortal women and are entangled in the same web of familial relationships as wives, daughters and mothers. The most powerful goddesses appear in the role of consorts and it does not necessarily mean that they are dependent upon their spouses but their power and its wielding gets tainted by familial roles. The domestication of women whether divine or mortal is not the only major conventional attribute associated with femininity. At an intense level, there is an ever present sense of intimidation related with femininity which finds expression in Hindu thought in the conception of ferocious goddesses aptly represented by Kali. This trait is also associated with gracious figures including the benevolent Mother Goddess who can also exercise violence even though for the security of for her children.

Goddesses and women are situated on different gradations of power. Yet one can spot continuation in this process too. Goddesses are often defined by their relationship with male spouses or their children placing them in the role of dependency. Contrariwise women also exert a kind of authority on the family through reverence they gain as nurturing mother figure or virtuous wife. In extreme cases, a woman could be exalted to the position of 'devi', the

term which connotes deep respect for a woman in Hindu society. The irony of the situation lies in the process that while equipping virtuous women with authority, they are also subject to self evasive duty. By placing goddesses and mortal women within a shared structure, Hindu thought has intertwined power and dependency with the image of womanhood, no matter, how different the two positions might be.

While reckoning the lives and works of women poets, it can be considered that they are an aberration in the design of gender roles that evolved in Hindu thought. Many of the women poets might have been tormented when they began to search for individual fulfilment beyond their pre-ordained roles within family or even reject the physical conventions prescribed by their gender identity. History does not tell about the number of such women who were forced back into submission and return to their conventional roles but some stood to their commitment to themselves. They surrendered themselves to their self - chosen God. For these women:

The trade-off was liberation from the regimentation of ordinary social life whose arbiters, in the kind of ironic about-face so frequent in the history of Hindu society, sanctified these same women as beings existing above the common dust. (Bose 154)

Another irony in the lives of these poets is their imagination of their intense personal relationship with God in terms of domesticity. In most cases, the god worshipped is the speaker's lover and husband. This may lead to conclusion that even on this plane, the poets are unable to escape their link to the family as an institution. But the significant difference lies in the fact that there is in reality no bondage in the human divine relationship as it is not a coerced relationship imposed upon the subject by her world but it is a relationship one enters into by her own will. Moreover, these forms of familial addresses are not limited only to women poets or to the Hindu spiritual tradition. In the traditions of mysticism across world, this form of addresses to God prevails and is used by women as well as men. This familial mode of approaching is no more than a metaphoric tool for capturing through the imagination the utterly unfathomable.

The socially determined rigour of women's lives as conceptualized in the religious and ethical texts is at sharp variance with the freedom that the women religious poets wrest from their world by rejecting human authority over their lives. The astonishing paradox that the same ethical system should

accommodate both inflexible regulation and their wholesale rejection may be the reason why that system survived through centuries of challenge and social turmoil from within and outside. (Bose 155)

The models constructed for women, restrictive at best and oppressive at worst, responds to every expectation that world can make of women and endow them with identities they can adopt at every stage of life. Despite the perpetual impulse of independence, the authoritative force in the Hindu discourse of women has been one of overpowering control. The acceptance of the high status of women poets within Hindu society has equal significance to that of the texts of Hindu law and social usage to comprehend the Hindu discourse of gender.

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